

## Outline the Story & Get Your Facts Straight

*Outline the story -*

As I said in *The Basics*, the first thing you need is an idea for a story. I will leave that process up to you, because idea generation is very much an individual sport.

After you have an idea, it is helpful to slap together an informal synopsis of the story. I generally don't save my synopses, because they are handwritten and a couple paragraphs in length. As an example, the synopsis of my story *Pigs Get Fed*, probably was something like this:



A young, lazy SEC attorney is assigned a fraud case. He ends up manipulating the timing of the public disclosure of the investigation to short the stock of the target company, and make a fortune. A sharp defense attorney who represents the company figures out what the lawyer did and decides to blackmail him and make his own fortune.

There's not much to go on, is there? And this is where the outline process can force you to put some much needed flesh on the skeleton's bones. It will also give you the ending of the story so you don't get lost trying to find it. Here is the first page of the actual outline I used for *Pigs Get Fed*:

### Corporate Story Outline

#### Opening Scene

- Two SEC attorneys at a bar
  - They talk about work, establishing who they are to reader
    - They work for the Chicago Division Office of the SEC
  - They note that Hawley's been assigned to a case with a whistle blower
    - He's been vetted by the investigative staff, which means the whistle blower has something to say
    - The two are envious and don't like Hawley, so we learn about him
    - They note Hawley will interview the whistle blower tomorrow am

#### Scene 2

- Hawley and Haynes in an interview room in SEC Chicago offices
  - Small talk, give some texture about Chicago
    - Establish some of Hayne's circumstances
  - Hawley gets down to business
    - His arrogance causes him to try and intimidate Haynes
      - Haynes protests, and we learn more about his circumstances

- Hawley starts asking investigative questions, referring to the vetting done by Investigative Division
  - Haynes tells what he knows about cooking the books at Consolidated

### Scene 3

- Hawley meets with his superior, the Regional Director, Agnes Sparrow
  - Tells her that there's really something to the case
  - Recommends that SEC open a formal investigation
  - Superior cites his lack of performance and warns him not to screw up and we learn something about what an arrogant hotshot Hawley is
  - Hawley is seething – this is his first dressing down
    - He keeps his cool, having just thought of an idea that Sparrow had given him when she mentioned risk to Consolidated stock
    - Hawley gets three days to get the facts together before a Formal Order is issued launching an official SEC investigation
  - Scene ends with Hawley deciding he needs to make some phone calls, but needs to use a public phone booth

*Pigs Get Fed* is one of my earlier stories. One learns lots of lessons in the early days of writing. A key lesson is that this story is simply too complicated, too ambitious for short fiction. The above excerpt is only the first page of a longer outline. The story wound up having seven scenes—at least three too many. But, despite this fundamental problem, I think it is a clever story if you have the patience to read it.



Note that the outline deals with each scene in the story. I have found this to be quite helpful, because I have found that a scene is really a story in itself. By outlining it, it gives me objectives to accomplish in each scene, a beginning and an end. When writing a scene, I often refer to the outline a number of times. If you have trouble getting your mind around how your story should be structured in terms of scenes, then you are better off creating a simpler outline that ignores them. From there you should gain enough clarity to deal with outlining the scenes.

If you read *Pigs Get Fed*, it, you will notice that the first scene in the outline never made it to the final version of the story. Also, there are many other details in the story that are not in the outline and vice-versa (e.g. the working title was *Corporate Story*, later changed to *Pigs Get Fed*). A key point: an outline is just a guide, an early rendition of the story. You will make changes—all kinds of changes—even throwing out entire scenes or altering the basic plot. Changes are a natural part of the writing process. As you write, new ideas come to you and better ways to arrange things pop up.



Go with the flow!

*Get your facts straight –*

I will use *Pigs Get Fed* as my example of the importance of research, since it dealt with some specialized areas, such as Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) procedures and disclosure rules for public companies. I also drew on my own knowledge, since I spent most of my career dealing with these areas. In a nutshell, anything I didn't know I simply looked up on the Internet, such as the SEC's Formal Order process and where their regional offices are located. The toughest thing to find was the tax form the



protagonist used to avoid paying U.S. income taxes on his ill-gotten gain (IRS Form 1001). I even went so far as to accurately describe the dining room in the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver. There are two principal reasons to do research. The first is that having correct facts gives your story credibility, which every story needs. Frankly, when I read a story with accurate descriptions of places I have been to, it

impresses me, and I want to read the rest of it. Also, facts add texture to your story and can help bring it alive, while making up those facts can kill it in a hurry. The second is simply that, as a writer, you don't want to be thought poorly of because you are lazy and make bonehead mistakes in gathering your facts.

An issue more or less related to research is the old axiom, "Write What You Know." I agree that you can sometimes add special insight, knowledge and even emotion to a story if it concerns something you actually lived or of which you are intimately familiar. Even the most meticulous research can't replace that kind of knowledge. However, if you stick to this axiom, unless you have lived an extraordinarily varied and exciting existence, you are really limiting your story choices. I say, take the plunge and go with your ideas, whether you know the subject or not. But do the research.

Sometimes you can find interviews or book excerpts dealing with people who are experts in the subject matter and have been kind enough to leave behind their insights. My boldest effort in this regard is *A Small Sin in Nuremberg*. I certainly did not live through the Holocaust, or the Nuremberg Trials. I don't know anybody with personal knowledge of the Holocaust. But I did my homework and had a good, strong plot. To date, I think it is my best writing.

